DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 515 CS 213 708

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TITLE The Culture of Detracking: How One School District Prepared To Detrack Its English Program.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ability Grouping; English Curriculum; English Departments; *English Instruction; *High Schools; *High School Students; *Program Administration; Public Education; Student Placement; Teacher Role; *Track System (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues; English Teachers; School Culture

ABSTRACT

One of the most undemocratic, destructive forces in education today is the tracking of students in high schools, as a great deal of research suggests. Schools that have successfully detracked instruction demonstrate similar characteristics. After careful preparatory efforts were made (including forming a study group), a high school in Long Island (New York) undertook to detrack its English program in the context of these research findings. Five important characteristics comprised the preparatory efforts for the final shift to detracking. First, educators confronted powerful norms that support tracking. Secondly, educators realized that effective change must be comprehensive, so that the changes must affect other dimensions of the school such as concept-based curriculum, instructional perspectives, students with special needs, and assessment. Third, educators were encouraged to promote inquiry and experimentation, including open dialogue in workshop sessions with parents and colleagues. Fourth, the roles of both teachers and administrators had to change. Finally, the leadership had to be totally committed to sustaining the preparatory efforts described and making the jump to a detracked English program. Such preparation for detracking seems time-consuming and unnecessary, but experience and research indicate that successful change can best result from such preparation, and that profound changes like detracking take time, flexibility, and wisdom. (HB)

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The Culture of Detracking: How One School District Prepared to Detrack Its English Program

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One of the most undemocratic, destructive forces in education is the tracking of students. This process is especially detrimental to learners placed in the lower track because it does not provide the educational opportunities enjoyed by students enrolled in the more challenging tracks. This unequal access to a school's offerings can negatively impact on lower-track learners since it limits the quality of academic experiences, lessens the diversity of social interactions, and decreases the number of successful peer role models. Over time, this negative environment significantly contributes to lower-tract students' self-fulfilling prophecy: Once a problem learner, always a problem learner.

Although research concerning the negative effects of tracking is considerable, more research is needed concerning the specific impact of detracking efforts. Fortunately, Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton (Phi Delta Kappan, February 1992) provide us with useful insights they have gained from anecdotes and analyses concerning detracking projects. Their overall conclusion is that a culture of detracking is more important than particular alternatives or approaches to implementation; however, there are commonalities in the culture of schools that detrack successfully. These commonalities may change in form, and they do not adhere to a specific sequence. Nonetheless, the following characteristics are evident in the culture of successfully detracked schools: (1) confronting powerful norms that support tracking, (2) realizing that changing the tracking system requires changing other dimensions of the schools, (3) nurturing inquiry and

experimentation, (4) modifying teachers' roles and responsibilities, and (5) sustaining the process of detracking through committed leadership.

What follows is a description of a Long Island (New York) high school's preparatory efforts to detrack the English program in the context of Oakes and Lipton's findings. These findings are adapted not only from their Kappan article but also from their more comprehensive work entitled Making the Best of Schools: A Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Policymakers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). The description below is not a detracking formula to be applied universally since individual schools have varying needs, resources, and constraints. While being sensitive to each school's unique qualities, we teachers and administrators can work cooperatively in adapting aspects of the Long Island high school's efforts to our own school's preparatory efforts to detrack.

Confronting the norms of tracking

During the 1991-92 school year, English teachers, the English department coordinator, and the high school principal informally discussed the impact of tracking on both the English program and the students it serves. Not surprisingly, those teaching lower-track students were the most discontent because their at-risk students demonstrated limited academic and behavioral growth. Those teaching average students referred to the English program as a wasteland that represented ongoing mediocrity. Conversely, teachers of honors students enjoyed the lively classroom

discussions that supported challenging books but felt that students in the other tracks deserved similar learning opportunities.

Since most of the English staff showed frustration with current tracking practices, the English coordinator suggested forming a study group to further explore this important issue. These individuals were joined by the high school principal, and they met weekly for a two-hour session after school. Initially, they discussed a variety of concerns about tracking. For example, some teachers observed that a disproportionate number of minority students were enrolled in the lower track English classes and that these students were experiencing an inadequate education. The building principal, on the other hand, was anxious about the politics of phasing out the honors classes and placing the honors students in heterogeneous sections. These concerns motivated the study group to seek my services as a consultant. After exploring the local problem, we decided to visit other schools currently undergoing detracking and to observe their efforts firsthand.

We also decided to read and discuss the professional literature, including John Goodlad and Jeanie Oakes' article in the February 1988 issue of Educational Leadership. This exploration helped us to realize that before the school could seriously undergo detracking, we must develop a deep understanding of why tracking has dominated secondary schools. Specifically, we became more aware of how tracking supports misconceptions about learning, intelligence, individual and group differences, and purposes of schooling. Gradually, we understood that successful detracking

requires a significant shift in our belief system, which must support diversity as an asset that enriches the heterogeneous classroom. This new perspective set the foundation for approaching change more comprehensively.

Effective change is comprehensive

Considering the professional literature while confronting the norms of tracking supported our increasing awareness that quick fixes do not lead to sustained detracking efforts. As Oakes and Lipton have observed, mixing classes to accommodate a diversity of students and teaching all students with the same strategies at the same time would inevitably result in frustrating, short-term outcomes. We therefore viewed detracking from a global perspective but recognized that we must act in specific ways. For example, everyone openly discussed the limitations of detracking students only in English classes, but we believed that tangible success with this initial approach would lead to similar success in the other content areas. We also considered the complex interactions among the various dimensions of schooling (described in the previously cited works), and we planned eclectically so that these dimensions are supportive of language arts. Finally, we organized comprehensive staff development to extend our professional efforts. Below are brief descriptions of these activities.

Concept-based curriculum. Full-day staff development sessions were conducted during the 1992-93 school year. The English coordinator and building principal, who remained vital members of the study group, supported these workshops by securing a related budget,

providing release time for the entire English staff, organizing substitute teachers to conduct the English staff's classes, and demonstrating commitment by attending all of the inservice sessions.

These sessions focused on further developing the language arts curriculum so that it emphasized central themes and concepts. Since prejudice was one of the many agreed upon themes, we developed thought-provoking instructional units supported by resources about prejudice. These resources included William Armstrong's Sounder, Ann Frank's The Diary of a Young Girl, Bette Greene's Summer of My German Soldier, Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, Toni Morrison's Beloved, and Corrie ten Boom's The Hiding Place. Focusing on central themes and concepts was believed best for accommodating students' individual backgrounds and for providing all students with equal access to knowledge.

Instructional perspective. Developing rich thematic and conceptual units for heterogeneous classrooms made us aware of the need for flexible learning environments that support not only teachers and materials but also a variety of intraclass grouping patterns. We therefore reviewed the professional literature and rediscovered grouping formats that focus on goals, stress active/interactive learning, and emphasize cooperation. These arrangements include sharing meetings, strategy groups, literature circles, and skill groups. (For descriptions of these and other grouping patterns, please refer to my article in the summer 1992 issue of Reading and Writing Quarterly.) In addition to small-group instruction, we

maintained a belief in whole-class activities that give students a sense of growing as a community of learners. We also recognized the merits of individual activities, especially for long-term projects.

Students with special needs. As the teachers, English coordinator, principal, and I engaged in workshop activities, we discussed the special needs of remedial and honors students. These two groups were considered to be at risk of becoming frustrated or bored in detracked classes, and the parents of honors students were known to be against having their children placed in heterogeneous classes. Thus, before developing specific activities for these students, the high school principal met with the assistant superintendent for instruction to discuss these concerns. The assistant superintendent suggested holding informal evening meetings with parents to discuss detracking and to encourage parental feedback. During these meetings, parents of remedial/special education children said that heterogeneous classes would probably prepare their children for the "real world" if appropriate support were provided. Parents of honors students, however, believed that detracked classes would expose their children to a "watered-down" curriculum that inadequately prepares them for competitive colleges. Although the professional staff had a strong commitment to detracking, they were anxious about forcing this approach on a reluctant group of parents who were vocal as well as politically linked to the board of education. We therefore decided that detracking efforts should first be made in the other English

sections and that successful outcomes would later be considered for the honors sections. We used this strategy to calm a potentially volatile group of parents who could have lessened or destroyed the credibility of all detracking efforts. In addition, we agreed with Oakes and Lipton's findings, which suggest special activities for honors students can be provided successfully either within detracked classrooms or after school--but only after significant time and work with parents.

With this perspective established, we resumed workshop activities and focused on support services for students with learning difficulties who are placed in heterogeneous classes. A positive, comprehensive approach seemed to be curricular congruence, which stresses instructional activities that are cooperatively planned and supported in both heterogeneous and remedial programs. In this arrangement, resource room teachers help students with learning difficulties to grasp the strategies and content they need to perform successfully in detracked classrooms. For curricular congruence to be carried effectively, the efforts of the department coordinator, building principal, resource room teachers, and regular classroom staff should be synchronized.

Thus, we invited the resource room teachers to attend our full-day staff development sessions, and we mutually planned the following activities:

- selecting and developing instructional materials that emphasize comprehension of connected text while they support at-risk

students' efforts in both resource room and classroom settings

- organizing similar reading/writing/study strategies for both settings
- scheduling substantial time in both settings for guided silent reading of interesting, independently selected, and easily read materials that enhance fluency and understanding
- stressing services that supplement, not supplant, the detracked curriculum
- arranging for mutual planning, joint meetings, or informal observations during instruction so that resource room and classroom teachers have an ongoing awareness of instructional practices in both settings.

Throughout these activities, the building principal was a major resource who assured the workshop participants that he would secure funding for instructional materials, support scheduling for comparable instruction in both the resource room and regular classroom, and provide additional services that would help students with special needs achieve success in detracked English classes. The principal also stressed the importance of making extra help available to all students so that any stigma related to support services would be prevented.

Assessment. Through staff development, we gained insights about the varied dimensions of schooling and their impact on detracking efforts. These insights increased our awareness of the need for assessment that is well-matched with a rich conceptual curriculum, a flexible instructional environment, and a sensitivity to students

with special needs. This comprehensive perspective clearly indicated that standardized testing, with its reductionist/subskill orientation, was inadequate for and dichotomous to detracked classrooms. We therefore pursued informal assessment strategies that are better matched with a heterogeneous environment.

For example, portfolio assessment was considered valuable for maintaining a record of students' growth, both academically and personally. Thus, if students just completed a thematic unit about prejudice, they could select from a variety of options to demonstrate their knowledge of this theme. Acting out a courtroom scene from To Kill a Mockingbird, writing as a journalist about the courageous family in The Hiding Place, and creating a poignant diary while pretending to be Ann Frank are among the options that not only represent degrees of understanding but also show personal growth with making choices. As students generate such outcomes, they produce records of achievement that can be included in their portfolios. Among these records are outlines, initial drafts, revisions, and completed works. In addition, while students engage in intraclass groups, the teacher can observe and note goal setting, interactions, and cooperation; recorded outcomes, in the form of checklists and anecdotes, are then placed in the portfolios. Finally, students with special needs deserve special responses, and their portfolios would therefore include congruent outcomes in both the heterogeneous classroom and the resource room. We considered these and other aspects of portfolio assessment to be useful for student-teacher conferences, for grading, and for

parent-teacher meetings.

Promoting inquiry and experimentation

Although preparing comprehensively for detracking involved confronting the norms of tracking and considering global aspects of change, we also used workshop sessions for nurturing inquiry and experimentation. While such nurturing is linked to the actual process of detracking, Oakes and Lipton believe it has an important place in the planning stage. This perspective supported our belief that open communication between educators and parents and cooperative nurturing by these two groups could help to sustain or institutionalize our detracking efforts. We also realized from past experience that engaging in an open dialogue about detracking would not always be a smooth process, but we felt that over time genuine discussions would lead to a sense of mutual ownership and a lasting outcome.

To provide an open dialogue and to accommodate parents' work schedules, evening meetings were held. Parents known to be in favor of and against detracking were invited, since they had children in the modified (or remedial), general, Regents, and honors tracks. In addition, district office administrators and board of education members received invitations. The English teachers, department coordinator, high school principal, assistant superintendent, and I shared with the audience some of our rewarding workshop experiences as we highlighted the value of detracking. We also invited interested parents to attend future staff development sessions, and we provided many opportunities for

audience feedback. Although much of the feedback was positive, the parents of honors children remained committed to homogeneous classes for honors students. The staff's response was to consider detracking for honors students as a long-term goal, after success with heterogeneous grouping is achieved in the other tracks. All members of the professional staff were not elated with this decision, but most agreed that it served as a practical, savvy strategy for dealing with the local, political context.

These efforts led to the formation of a board of education advisory committee consisting of parents, central office and building administrators, supervisors, English teachers, and other content area teachers. The committee was charged with the responsibility of continuing an open dialogue about detracking and of maintaining the nurturing of inquiry and experimentation. The weekly meetings generated discussions that ranged from reflective to volatile. Over time, a balanced perspective began to emerge, and agreement was reached on a number of important items concerning the local culture of detracking. These include:

- Teachers should be encouraged to take risks as they experiment with aspects of detracking.
- Staff development should be extended into the 1993-95 school years.
- The actual detracking of the English program should be considered for the 1995-96 school year.
- The honors sections should remain until effective detracking is demonstrated with the other English sections.

- Other content areas should consider detracking after successful efforts are achieved with the English program.
- A newsletter should be developed so that everyone is kept abreast of developments concerning detracking.
- The advisory committee in cooperation with the board of education should develop a districtwide policy concerning ability grouping and tracking.

Changing teachers' roles and responsibilities

The high school principal and English coordinator deserve special recognition for involving teachers in virtually every preparatory stage of detracking. Thus, the individuals who were expected to "live" with detracking after implementation were engaged in major decision-making during the planning of this innovation. These changing roles inspired the teachers to pilot several heterogeneous classes for the purpose of experimenting with thematic teaching, small-group instruction, and other instructional approaches. Positive experiences of this type set the foundation for future success with detracking.

Committed leadership

The English teachers' changing roles and responsibilities were important steps toward empowerment, but their energy did not negate the leadership commitment to detracking. The general scenario concerned the teaching staff, English coordinator, and building principal cooperatively planning an innovation that would impact on every aspect of learning and teaching. Although these efforts did not always flow smoothly, the educational leaders' strong

commitment was vital for overcoming the barriers and for sustaining the preparatory efforts.

Summary

At a glance, this Long Island high school's comprehensive preparation to detrack may seem time-consuming and unnecessary. Practical experience and the professional literature, however, clearly indicated to us that no quick fixes or easy answers are available for modifying tracking and the misconceptions that underlie it. For example, Paul George, in his thought-provoking monograph How To Untrack Your School (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1992), reminds us to be cautious when carrying out detracking efforts. George's main concern is that educators often prefer action to reflection when they have identified a problem and that their impulsive action at the beginning might jeopardize the entire innovation.

While focusing on reflection, we gained important insights about the dynamics of change. Foremost was the realization that profound change takes time and that no succinct formula is feasible. We also learned to make concessions, such as initiating detracking only through the English department and considering heterogeneous classes for honors students as a long-term goal; these concessions fit the idiosyncracies of the local school setting. While being flexible, we still maintained a sense of mission as we dealt with the community , board of education, district office, and faculty. Throughout these many challenging experiences, the English teachers, the department coordinators, and

the high school principal focused on detracking as a process that would be sustained, would provide equal access to learning, and would benefit the future of society. With no naivete intended, this thrust is being maintained from the comprehensive planning stage to the implementation phase scheduled for 1995-96.